

Canada's New Food Guide: A Dietitian's Perspective

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On January 22, 2019, Health Canada unveiled the ninth version of Canada's Food Guide. This was a necessary overhaul as the previous version, *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide*, hadn't been updated since 2007 (Health Canada, 2007). Canada's Food Guide is a tool developed by Health Canada to provide a basic tool to improve nutrition education and literacy in Canadians. The previous food guide received scrutiny from health professionals and the general public claiming it was outdated and influenced by the food industry, thereby adversely affecting its credibility (Health Canada, 2015). The newest version was produced in consultation with Canadians, including the general public, policy makers, and healthcare professionals and provides nutrition recommendations that align with the current nutrition research. The new Food Guide has many improvements; however, there are still some areas that lack inclusiveness for all Canadians.

The most evident change in the new Food Guide is the shift away from a prescription of how much you need from the different food groups. The previous food groups in *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide* were vegetables and fruit, grain products, milk and alternatives, and meat and alternatives with recommended serving amounts based on age and gender. Consumers using the previous Food Guide found challenges with understanding the portion sizes and translating the information into meals and snacks (Health Canada, 2015). The new Food Guide shows a more basic approach with an image of a plate where half the plate is vegetables and fruit, a quarter of the plate is protein foods, and the last quarter is filled with whole grain foods.

Protein Foods

Creating broader categories, such as "protein foods", demonstrates to Canadians who look to Canada's Food Guide for nutrition guidance that protein can come from a variety of sources, including plant-based foods such as legumes, nuts, and seeds, or from animal sources like meat, poultry, and dairy. The healthy eating recommendations on the new Food Guide also make a point to say "choose protein foods that come from plants more often" (Health Canada, 2015). This message is important as there are many health and environmental benefits to including more plant proteins, even if meat and dairy are still part of the diet. Along with being a good protein source, legumes are also high in fibre, B-vitamins and minerals like magnesium, iron, and potassium, while being low in saturated fat. Research shows that consumption of beans, lentils, or soy is associated with a decreased risk of colorectal cancer, cardio-

vascular disease, and Type 2 diabetes (Zhu et al, 2015; Martventano et al, 2017; Bazzano et al, 2011; Sievenpiper et al, 2009).

Adapting a more plant-based dietary pattern to reduce meat intake can also have profound benefits for the environment. Scientists have found that when meat-based dietary patterns are replaced with plant-based alternatives it can have a substantial impact on the environment, including reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, land use, water use, and fuel use. (Rose et al, 2019, Sabaté et al, 2015). There is also a section of the new Food Guide with grocery shopping tips that encourage Canadians to think of the environment by using reusable bags, to choose products with less packaging, and to buy in-season fruits and vegetables. In a time when climate change is becoming one of the most urgent global issues, it is important to focus on dietary patterns that can promote a sustainable food system that will support future generations.

Food Processing

The Food Guide also focuses on encouraging dietary patterns that limit highly processed foods, which can add excess sodium, sugars, and saturated fat. Eating too much of these foods can increase the risk of chronic diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes, and heart disease (Moubarac, 2017). The shift away from food and nutrients in isolation and towards a dietary pattern rich in whole foods is a more beneficial way for Canadians to think about their nutrition. Along with the development of the new Food Guide, there should be public health interventions to improve the food environment to help Canadians limit their intake of highly processed foods. Two examples could be creating sustainable environments to increase the availability of affordable produce for low income populations and developing policies to restrict marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children to make processed food less appealing.

Hydration

Advice on hydration on the new Food Guide has also caught up with current evidence. It recommends that water should be the main beverage of choice and that 100% fruit juice, vegetable juices, and sugary drinks, including sugar-sweetened milk, should be limited. The previous Food Guide stated that a half cup portion of fruit or vegetable juice was equivalent to one serving of fruits or vegetables. Although 100% fruit and vegetable juices provide vitamins

and minerals it is also a significant source of sugars and lacks fibre. It is recommended to consume whole fruits and vegetables instead. Milk is no longer its own food group on the new Food Guide but along with water, lower fat and unsweetened milk is listed as another healthy drink choice for those who wish to include it in their diet.

Mindful Eating

Another big change to Canada's Food Guide is advice on mindful eating. Mindful eating consists of being conscious of all sensations during eating, such as thoughts, taste, and feelings. Thirty percent of Canadians eat all of their meals alone and 60% of Canadians sometimes eat while doing another activity, such as using technology, watching television, preparing meals, listening to the radio, reading, or working (Statistics Canada, 2018). Being distracted or eating alone during a meal can make it challenging to be mindful while eating. This can impact the amount of food or drinks consumed, as well as the level of enjoyment from the meal. The new Food Guide encourages Canadians to create a positive eating environment by removing distractions by turning off technology, eating with others, and making the eating area attractive.

Areas for Improvement

The new Canada's Food Guide has provided many new recommendations that are up-to-date with current nutrition research that will hopefully shape the thinking around what and how Canadians eat; however, there are some areas of the Food Guide that are not applicable to all Canadians.

One population that may struggle to meet the new guidelines is low-income Canadians. The plate that is displayed on the Food Guide provides an arrangement of bright and fresh fruits and vegetables that are not affordable for everyone, especially individuals experiencing food insecurity. It is important to provide examples which support inclusiveness for all budgets. This could be achieved by including an image of frozen blueberries or a cube of frozen spinach along with the images of fresh produce. This image would demonstrate that more affordable and accessible frozen fruits and vegetables can be a part of a healthy plate.

Another critique of the new Canada's Food Guide is that there is little representativeness for cultural groups. A solution to demonstrate cultural diversity would be to provide examples of meals from different cultures and how individuals can adapt cultural meals to fit the recommendations.

The new Canada's Food Guide does consist of gaps that will prevent it from being applied to all Canadian populations, and it is very unlikely that one guide will suit the needs of everyone. According to Canadian Health Minister, Ginette Petitpas Taylor, the benefit to the new guide is that documents will constantly be updated to reflect new research in nutrition (Global News, 2019). This provides the opportunity to create resources tailored to low income populations or different cultural groups. Although the guide is not perfect,

it provides much more up-to-date and realistic recommendations around the foods to consume and related behaviours to improve nutrition education and literacy for Canadians.

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